

Rage against the dying of the light

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With apologies to Dylan Thomas, I believe the final two lines of his famous poem precisely sum up Brexit. Perhaps, at the moment of the Brexiters' greatest triumph, this seems bizarre. After all, the UK is due to leave the EU tomorrow at 11pm. And yet, for all the arguments over 50p and whether a clock should chime, the light will die and that good night will overtake us.

What do I mean by this? For most, Brexit is intrinsically bound up with identity. In particular, it is bound up with a very particular form of *English* national identity. It is a particular form of identity most likely – but not exclusively – to be held by certain demographic groups. Yet this particular national identity is dying and the Brexit it envisages cannot be.

Two central themes come out again and again from survey evidence^[1] and interviews^[2]. The first is a desire to repatriate decision-making to the national level and the second is the centrality of migration in 2016. Contrary to what is argued by many, this wasn't about Empire, a sense of aggrandisement or English exceptionalism.

“We just want to be a normal country” was the refrain. “Take back control” was a powerful political slogan for precisely this reason. Like many of the best slogans, it spoke to people on multiple levels. Firstly, a great many of voters feel alienated from the centres of power – whether in Brussels or Westminster.

The process of decision-making in the EU is often opaque and frequently unedifying. Well-remunerated, multi-lingual officials well-versed in European politics and various political cultures – however competent and deserving they are – cannot help but have little in common with the average voter.

Brexit must be understood domestically. Most EU-wide decisions have at least some British sign-off. Certainly major EU treaties (Maastricht, Nice and Lisbon, for example) transferring powers and/or competencies to the EU have done. Similarly EU enlargement has

had a British imprimatur. The UK government had an absolute right to veto these things and actively chose not to.

These decisions were irreversible. Many *simply do not trust their own government*. As an example: the possibility of Turkish accession played a significant role in the EU referendum. Certainly, this was widely dismissed by Remain-voters and leading pro-Remain politicians as well as other EU leaders. As a practical possibility it was a complete canard. However, this misses the point: voters feared the UK government would accede to Turkish membership of the EU at some point in the future.

In this sense, alienation was with regard to Westminster as much as Brussels. Yet English voters have no other democratic avenue through which to effect policy change. This stands in stark contrast to Scotland where the Scottish Government enjoys (and successfully wields) significant devolved powers.

Yet “taking back control” in the sense desired by those who voted for Brexit will not happen. Why shouldn’t nations set their own regulations on, for example, bananas? Well, every time a shipment involving bananas needs to cross an international border it will need to be inspected to ensure it adheres to the regulations of the importing country.

Some other (non-banana) shipments will also be inspected as well in order to avoid banana smuggling. Of course, other things (e.g. car parts) are likely to get stuck in a queue of freight traffic whilst these banana inspections are carried out. The EU facilitates frictionless trade by providing countries with a mechanism to standardise banana regulations (and, fairly obviously, other goods).

There is a reason for the EU’s political structures, however unwieldy they might be at times. The ECJ so widely cast as villainous by Brexiters exists so as to arbitrate when disputes over these shared regulations (and a great deal else) arise.

These regulatory differences are what most free-trade agreements seek to minimise. Every time the UK signs one, it will be trading away sovereignty. “Giving away control”, so to speak. Some countries (e.g. India) will want to link this to relaxing immigration requirements.

Compared to the ECJ, arbitration will be significantly more opaque. Moreover, even if the UK doesn't sign *any* such agreements, many of the things we consume will adhere to the rules of a large trading bloc.

Most UK vehicles, for example, unless actively prohibited from doing so will continue to adhere to EU standards in most areas. It simply is not worthwhile producing separate models for a market as small as the UK. The UK might choose to adhere to US standards in certain areas, but we won't have "taken back control": we will simply have chosen to delegate control to a different large trading partner.

In practical terms, one market looms far larger than any others for our small country: the EU. As such, I expect the UK to cleave reasonably closely to EU standards in many areas. I expect to see the UK wielding less control over regulations post-Brexit and not more. The Brexit desired cannot be.

We now come to the second element of this identity crisis: the impending death of Englishness. Contrary to the views espoused by some, this particular Englishness is not inherently racist in the sense of discriminating or actively disliking those who are not English. However, to be a white Anglo-Saxon is the default in this universe. Anything else (from Celt to Nigerian) is "other".

According to this view, the English are a nation and are entitled to self-determination (thus rendering England for the white, Anglo-Saxon) English. Others are welcome as guests and may even make their home here, but "this land is our land". Given this primacy, it is not surprising that a minority do hold actively racist views. None of this is new of course – witness the popularity of Enoch Powell in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

However, this identity is held most commonly by demographic groups that are shrinking. Within England (ironically unlike Scotland), around a third of babies born now have at least one parent who was born abroad. A significant additional number are members of ethnic minority groups in which both parents were born in the UK.

It isn't surprising that those parts of the UK where the population skews young identify much less strongly as "English". Moreover, such an ethnocentric identity does not appeal to those growing up in a

diverse environment and it is less likely to appeal to those who hold degree-equivalent qualifications. Half of 18 year-olds today go to university and few under-40s get their news from sensationalist tabloids.

If (although I increasingly feel it is likely to be a question of when) Scotland chooses to leave the UK, this will accelerate. Scotland is considerably older and whiter than England. Make no mistake, insofar as Brexit is a reflection of England's identity crisis, it is indeed a generation's rage against the dying of the light. The world they spent much of their lives inhabiting is gone for good. The "control" they crave is forever lost and the national identity they hold is now going – admittedly not gently – into that good night.

1. Ashcroft, M. *How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday... and why*. 2016; Available from: <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/>.
2. De Ruyter, A., et al., *Tales from an Episodic Journey into "Brexitland": Understanding the Underlying Factors as to Why People Voted "Leave"*. CBS Working Paper, Forthcoming.